

CONFLICT ON THE HUMAN SERVICES COORDINATION TEAM

The meeting you dread will begin in less than an hour. You reluctantly take out the files on Mack Jones and Mary Smith for one last review.

As Director of Field Services for the Human Services Coordination Team of the State Services Department (SSD), you supervise Mack; Mack supervises Mary. Mack, white male, is Northeast Regional Director, and Mary, black female, is Mack's specialist in inner-city problems. The team's mission is to work with citizens' groups, private agencies, other public agencies, and SSD's own program divisions; to coordinate the targeting of social services; and to increase citizen involvement in their delivery. A major part of that mission involves identifying individuals and groups that need specific services and assisting them in making claims on those best able to meet their needs. You spend a lot of time on the road visiting the regional offices, which are the central units of the team.

The regional directors like Mack have multiple responsibilities including but not limited to:

- developing work assignments for the subordinates
- interpreting headquarters' policies, strategies, and priorities
- implementing strategies in the field
- supervising their subordinates closely and giving them more coaching feedback than is common in most social-service work.

After all, the team's mission is coordination, and that means that its own staff should be the best coordinated of all.

Mack's file reveals that he has been a member of the team in the Northeast region since it was authorized a year and a half earlier. Mack has a college degree with a double major in sociology and political science. He has three years in the Army. He completed one year of graduate work in sociology before taking a planning position elsewhere in the department. Selected for the team because of interest and performance, Mack receives generally good evaluations and reflects increasing interest in "street-level" administration. Mack is among the younger employees expected to rise to positions of considerable responsibility in the department.

Mary is seven years older than Mack. She has completed about two years' college credit. Her interest in "street-level" administration is not new. Before joining the Human Services Coordination Team at the same time Mack did, she was a community-relations specialist with the Community Action Program. Almost everyone in the region knows Mary's name, and in the black community of 15,000 there are few people who do not know her personally. She led a well-publicized rent strike, worked for community control of the police, and helped initiate compensatory programs for the disadvantaged in the local community college. Her specialty in the northeast region is working with the black communities.

You found her to be capable at the start. She is the best person in the region for handling service delivery foul-ups, both because she knows the right people and because she is inventive at creating constructive responses. Evaluations of her

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performance during the first year were positive. Mack's predecessor as regional director was an older black male who left the job for a top position in post-release correctional services. He knew Mary for many years, and they worked well together. You feared that some problems might develop when you promoted Mack, even though Mack seemed to have support from each of his coworkers.

Initially, Mack worked out well. After a couple of months, friction developed between Mary and Mack. Mack wrote that Mary was resisting direction. Most recently, Mary has missed two weekly staff meetings of the field staff without notice or explanation. When Mack told her that if she missed a third consecutive staff meeting he would consider giving her a written reprimand, Mary blew up. She called him a racist and a sexist incompetent in tones that could be heard by anyone nearby. She stormed out of the office, and did not return for a day and a half. She returned to the office in a quieter manner with a signed agreement by a voluntary agency to open a day-care center in the inner city. That was a good piece of work.

Mary arrives first in the regional office's conference room. You ask her to have a seat. You say, "Good to see you." "I heard about your blowup with Mack the other day and thought the three of us ought to get together. You've worked together for long enough that an incident like this is cause for concern. Do you want to talk for a few minutes before Mack comes in, or would you rather wait?"

Mary replies, "Oh, I don't know, I'm sorry I yelled and got him upset, but he's really been after me. I used to think he was understanding, but now I'm not sure. He tries hard, but he's not as knowledgeable as he thinks, and he's been putting on a lot of airs."

You ask, "What do you mean?"

"You know, playing like he's the big boss with all these evaluations. I've worked here as long as he has, and I know my job. He should be helpful, but instead he's always trying to act superior."

You are interrupted by a knock on the door. It is Mack. You tell him to come in.

Mack is a little nervous and awkward as he sits down. He smiles at Mary and then asks you how things are at headquarters. After a brief reply, you suggest they get down to business. "Why don't each of you tell what you think is going on? Mack, do you want to go first?"

"Well, if that's the way you would like to proceed. I think this is a very complicated situation with a lot of elements in it."

Mack pauses and thinks for a minute. "I respect Mary a lot, and I'm a little uneasy saying some of this because we have worked together as equals before I became her supervisor."

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You interrupt. “I have an idea. Why don’t you talk to Mary as well as to me? After all, whatever is going on, and whatever we manage to do here today, you two are still going to have to work things out between you.”

Mack: “All right. Before I became your supervisor, when the office first opened, Mary, we worked mostly on helping people caught between the cracks in social services or people getting a bureaucratic run-around—you know case kinds of things. I don’t know if you have an equal around here in handling that kind of matter.

Mary: “Well, that’s the first time you have ever admitted that!”

You: “Hmmm, Continue?”

Mack: “All right, casework isn’t all that we should be doing. Our real goal is human-services integration. I’ve felt that one of the reasons I was promoted was because you felt I could help this region get more into programmatic activities. The kinds of things where instead of helping a few people, we implement a change that will help lots of people now and into the future. It’s been my goal to try to do that. Things like helping service-delivery agencies establish good coordination mechanisms between city agencies or between the county and the department. We shouldn’t do all the coordinating; we should be setting it up so other people do that. Isn’t that right?”

You reply, “That’s one of the objectives.”

Mack: “I’ve tried to do that since becoming regional director.” Mack looks at Mary. “For some reason—I don’t know why—you’ve always seemed to resist that idea.”

Mary: “That’s not true.”

You: “Mary, you’ll get your turn. Mack, go on and remember to tell Mary your thoughts.”

Mack: “My feeling is that both your experience and your talents lead you to prefer casework.”

Mary looks upset.

You: “Wait a minute, let’s try and avoid motivations and interpretations. Just describe what happened. We’ll look for causes in due time.”

Mack agrees and continues. “The first few suggestions I gave you just seemed to bounce right off and disappear. Mary, I suggested you try to improve coordination between County Probation, and the summer softball programs. You said you didn’t know anyone in the athletic programs and that they didn’t work in the city. Then there was the business with developing support in the City Council for community-based mental-health halfway houses. Nothing ever came from this. I tried to talk to you about

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that and tried to get you to set down on paper your goals for the next six months. You never did. Instead, you gave me a lot of excuses about how busy you were. Then you began getting into arguments a lot during the last two or three months and..."

Mary: "What do you mean a lot? And besides, I didn't have any arguments, just a few disagreements."

Mack responds as he gives an exaggerated shrug, "Man, if those weren't arguments, I don't know!"

You laugh and ask: "Mack, What's an argument to you?"

Mack: "That's hard to define. I guess when people start getting heated over their disagreements."

You ask Mary, "What about you?"

Mary: "Well, both people at least have to start yelling. If my ears don't hurt it's not much of an argument."

You: "OK. What happened next?"

Mack: "I don't know, things just started to go downhill. I feel that Mary just hasn't kept up with the others in terms of program improvements. I tried to get her to see this at the weekly staff meetings by having other people talk about what they were doing."

Mary interjects: "That was an attempt to put me down."

You: "Hold on, let's keep motives out of this. How did you feel, that's the question."

Mary: "Well, I felt angry. He never wanted to..."

You: "Tell it to Mack."

Mary: "You are something! All right, you never wanted to hear about what I was doing. I was doing a lot of things. I got the locations changed on the health clinics, and I found a way to get hot meals for the old folks, and I steered a group of kids into a teen center they never knew existed, and a whole lot of other things. But all those meetings just were a lot of talk about bureaucratic I-don't-know-what. I thought I was supposed to work against that, not make more of it!"

Mack: "That's just the point. If we don't make these agencies work right, then no one will get the services they need. I know you mean well, but in the long run this way is better for the black community and all people."

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Mary: "What do you know about the black community? Have you every lived there? That's what I'm supposed to know. If you knew anything about the black community, you'd know better what an argument is and what isn't."

Mack: "Well, when someone stomps around an office picking fights and contradicting everyone, that's an argument."

Mary: "Oh, you and your middle-class standards. What do you know? I have a right to get upset once in a while. Besides, what am I supposed to do? There's no one in that office I can talk to. Everyone's so concerned with doing good they never bother to find out what the people are like."

Mack: "You don't have any monopoly on the people. We work with lots of different kinds of people. It's not just the black community, and you have to understand that."

You: "I think we are getting diverted from the main issue. Why don't you tell Mack more about his idea of programs?"

Mary: "Well, he's got some problems about black folks that need some work, but all right. I never did understand all that program stuff. I remember about the softball leagues, but I don't know any of those people. When I came to you about that you just gave me some names to call. Well I already had gotten the names! I tried to talk to some of the people and they just gave me the run-around. They're a lot of racists over there, and you never should have asked me to deal with them. Charlie knows all those people. Why don't you ask him?"

Mack: "That's just the point. You have to expand your base of operations if you are going to become programmatic. You should be able to deal with all kinds of situations. If you are going to get good evaluation reports, you have to do the same as all the other field officers."

Mary: "Who's doing the evaluations? You? How are you going to evaluate me? You don't understand the black community and you don't know our needs. I was hired to work on the things I know best. And that's what I do. You got all these fancy ideas about programs and all that bureaucratic stuff, but you don't understand blacks or how to evaluate us. You don't understand me enough to help me when I ask for it, so how can you evaluate me. All you do is put me down at staff meetings, and then you wonder why I don't come and threaten me with reprimands and all that."

Mack: "I certainly can evaluate you and your work. I use the same standards that I use to evaluate anyone's work. There's no difference between black and white. This isn't a race issue, and I resent your trying to make it one."

Mary: "That's where you're wrong. If you think you just go out and hang the same standards on all people, you are a racist and you don't even know it!" Mary yells. "You call yourself a supervisor and think you can evaluate me? You don't even know what I

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do, and you don't even care. All you care about is your so-called program plans, and I don't need any of those white middle-class standards that's been keeping black people down for years!"

Directions: Answer the following questions.

- 1.) So far, the discussion has brought up some issues, and things are beginning to get hot. Where would you like to see the discussion go from here? How do you think you have handled the conflict so far and what would you have done differently?
- 2.) How would you help Mack and Mary develop greater understanding and concern for each other's work? Are Mack and Mary too emotionally connected to their work? As a supervisor, when is the issue of race relevant? As a supervisor, is the issue of race relevant?
- 3.) Should Mary be evaluated or otherwise treated differently from the other members of the field staff? Can staff members be evaluated differently?
- 4.) You are also aware of the differences of opinion and values between Mack and Mary. Which points of disagreement **are** proper subjects for management concern?
- 5.) What are the differences in Mack's and Mary's skills, education, and experience?
- 6.) Does Mary have a complaint or grievable issue?
- 7.) How should Mack and Mary each document their exchanges?
- 8.) How can Mack regain confidence as a leader to Mary? What would you advise him to do?
- 9.) Is Mary a "loose-cannon" or "time-bomb" employee?